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NSC FOR MGAVIN AND CHUDSON

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SUBJECT: RECLUSIVE SLA/AW COMMANDERS WELCOME SE GRATION IN JEBEL MARRA

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: On April 5 rebel commanders from SLA/Abdul Wahid and an enthusiastic local population warmly welcomed Presidential Special Envoy Scott Gration and his delegation to Darfur's most inaccessible area, the mountainous rebel enclave of Jebel Marra. Praising the US and hoping for strong cooperation in the future, the commanders concurred that any future security agreement must bind together all Darfuri factions, but they scoffed at the prospect of traveling to Doha to negotiate with Joint AU-UN Chief Mediator for Darfur Bassole, as they consider the Qatars and JEM to be Islamist proxies for the NCP. The commanders emphasized they would accept only high-level US involvement in any negotiations, and alluded to discussions with other movements and Fur leaders that are currently ongoing. The unscheduled, last-minute arrival of the reclusive commander Gaddura, second-in-command of SLA/AW, was the highlight of this unprecedented USG visit to Jebel Marra. Gaddura and the other commanders welcomed SE Gration's direct engagement in the Darfur peace process. End summary.

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THOUSANDS CHANTING "UP, UP, USA!" GREET SE GRATION  
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**¶2.** (SBU) Arriving by UNAMID helicopter from El Fasher, Presidential Special Envoy Scott Gration, USSes Shortley, CDA Fernandez and embooffs landed on April 5 in the forbidding mountainous terrain around Deribat, the de-facto capital of east Jebel Marra's rebel "liberated zone". Rebel commanders from the Sudanese Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid (SLA/AW), clad in full battle fatigues and draped with bandoliers and magic amulets, plus several civilian administrators of Deribat, and thousands of children and well-wishers huddled as the descending helicopter kicked-up a storm of dust over the hilltop landing site. Emerging from the helicopter to chants of "Up, up, USA!" and "Go, go, Obama", SE Gration was greeted by: Mohammed Adam Abdulsalem (Terada) and Jaber Hasballah (Jaber), SLA/AW's chief field commanders in East Jebel Marra; Abdulla Khalil, SLA/AW's English-speaking administrator for Deribat; and Mohamed Mahmoud, an SLA/AW commander and brother to prominent Khartoum-based civil society activists.

**¶3.** (SBU) Abdalla Khalil ushered the group into Deribat's unlit, spartan town hall, as excited rebels and local tribal leaders crowded in to the standing-room-only meeting alongside NGO and UNAMID representatives. Praising US involvement in Darfur, Khalil said, "The American people have played a great role in assisting the people of Darfur. In the beginning of the conflict, the United States was on the side of the Darfuris. We have great respect for the US, and we hope to have strong cooperation in the future." Enumerating problems similar to those brought up in Zam Zam IDP camp the previous day (septel), Khalil linked the marginalization of Fur living in the Jebel Marra region to what he described as transgressions of the Khartoum regime, and accused Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir and the National Congress Party (NCP) of

committing war crimes and genocide, and obstructing humanitarian aid to the region. He pointed out that rebel commanders present had come from throughout Darfur to attend the meeting and that, after years of American focus on the Zaghawa minority-based rebel movements (Minnawi, SLA/Unity and JEM), "you are finally reaching out to the right people". SE Gration thanked the group for the honor of addressing them in their homeland, and the assembled commanders and leaders broke out in celebratory chants when SE Gration added, "There can be no peace in Darfur without the Fur."

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"ABDUL WAHID IS BEING WISE," TERADA TELLS SE  
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¶4. (SBU) Assembled in a smaller, roundtable meeting with the delegation, commanders Terada, Jaber and Majib al Rahman responded positively but cautiously to SE Gration's suggestions on a common security ceasefire in Darfur among the movements. "We agree that complete solidarity is the way to go, as local arrangements won't work," Jaber said. "The problem is the process - we have a hard time organizing with other movements, because there is no trust, no mediator." However, the group was dismissive when asked if they considered going to Qatar to participate in the Darfur peace process, implying that the Gulf Arab state could not act as an impartial mediator. "Khalil Ibrahim, the Islamists in Doha, Turabi, the NCP - they are all the same," Abdalla Khalil rejoined. Jaber was more amenable to the suggestion, saying, "In principle, we agree to go to Doha, but we know about their relationship with the regime here. The US could change the rules to push the process," he added, in a way to encourage the distrusting movements to participate.

¶5. (SBU) Responding to CDA's query on how the US should approach

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Abdul Wahid, Jaber was steadfast in his support of the Parisian-exile, Fur leader, but also acknowledged his shortcomings.

"He is our president, our brother, and our leader, but he must respond to what people want, and interact with the international community." Majib al Rahman, the elder within the group, voiced similar concerns, hinting that the movement has wavered as its leader has remained in Paris. "He must act in the interests of his people, not in the interests of one man." They suggested that the USG should double-track any discussion with Abdul Wahid with them so they can track that their leader is acting "in the interests of the people".

¶6. (SBU) All members of the group were quick to find fault with the role played by the international community at the 2007 Abuja negotiations for the still-unimplemented Darfur Peace Agreement. "I was at Abuja, and we were all surprised when Minni Minnawi was chosen. He is a problem," said Abdalla Khalil, who criticized the international community for making what he said were hasty agreements as a solution the problem of Darfur (Khalil also noted that JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim is worse than Minni). "We would like to see the problem of Darfur solved during the term of Barack Obama," said El Sadig Rokero, the vocal humanitarian coordinator for SLA/AW, "but the NCP has signed 11 different peace agreements with the Darfur movements, and has broken all of them. What is the position of the US government to the signing of agreements that the NCP will break?" Rokero was skeptical that any country could wring agreements out of the ruling regime, adding, "President Bashir doesn't want peace. If you support a deal that they break, then what will happen to us?"

¶7. (SBU) Still wearing his green battle scarf even indoors, the terse commander Terada spoke last in support of Abdul Wahid's refusal to go to Doha. "Abdul Wahid is not being stubborn, he is being wise. I trust him. I saw him last in Geneva in December, and we are very close." He was insistent that the movement holds only defensive positions in Jebel Marra to maintain a buffer against GOS aggression. "We continue to obey the 2004 N'Djamena ceasefire, but the NCP does not. Their attacks during Ramadan last year were against all movements. We want to open a new page, but they are supporting the militias against us." He pressed the US not to dismiss Abdul Wahid, but alluded to an upcoming meeting of Fur rebel commanders in and out of SLA/AW that will work to resolve

differences among the tribes. "In a few days, we will have a big meeting. You will be surprised. We need to solve the problem with all the tribes."

¶ 8. (SBU) SLA/AW commanders and representatives presented SE Gration with a formal letter addressed to President Obama that listed their concerns in Darfur and pressed the US to directly support their movement. A full translation of the letter will be transmitted septel.

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DERIBAT: UNDEVELOPED, REMOTE, IN THE DARK  
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¶ 9. (SBU) Following the meeting, local representatives of Samaritan's Purse (SP) drove SE Gration, CDA and accompanying delegation on a tour of Deribat, an undeveloped town of un-mortared stone houses without electricity. At a dilapidated local school, the teachers and schoolchildren eagerly welcomed SE Gration and his delegation in unlit rooms. SE Gration presented the school with two boxes of Arabic-language textbooks supplied by Post's Public Affairs Section. Representatives from SP and Medecines Du Monde briefed the delegation on their projects, which include a small medical clinic and agricultural terracing projects in the surrounding hillsides. Not surprisingly, despite the NCP's accusations that international NGOs are not welcome in Sudan, residents of Deribat are highly supportive of these NGOs' efforts to address the humanitarian gaps in the community.

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THE ELUSIVE GADDURA ARRIVES AT THE LAST MINUTE  
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¶ 10. (SBU) Once the delegation returned to the hilltop landing pad to depart for El Fasher, word quickly spread that the notoriously elusive rebel commander Abdelgadir Abdelrahman Ibrahim (Gaddura) was approaching Deribat. Gaddura, second in command of SLA/AW and Abdul Wahid's direct deputy within Jebel Marra, had not confirmed in advance he would be present at the meeting, and even Terada had said earlier in the day that Gaddura would not attend. A ululating clamor arose from the hillside and within minutes, seven technicals crammed with weaponry and battle-ready rebels climbed the hill,

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charged past the cheering villagers and stopped short of the helicopter. Disembarking his technical with his dreadlocked chief of staff Yusuf in tow, Gaddura strode to SE Gration, placed his right hand on the SE's right shoulder in a traditional sign of respect, and then firmly shook his hand as hundreds of fighters and onlookers shouted their approval.

¶ 11. (SBU) Apologizing for his tardiness, the powerfully-built Gaddura explained that he and his troops had driven ten hours, were held up at the last minute by a broken axle, but were elated that they had a chance to meet the direct representative of President Obama. "This is the right way to achieve peace in Darfur, and we are sure you will succeed." Yusuf pledged SLA/AW's full support of US initiatives, but added that much more needed to be done. "It is important to bring the Fur people protection against the government. UNAMID is functionless, they can't even protect themselves. We need US and European troops in Darfur to protect civilians, and we welcome all international organizations to Darfur."

¶ 12. (SBU) Comment: The first visit of any USG official to Jebel Marra in recent memory revealed a surprisingly resilient but marginalized community that is eager for peace, for American support and justifiably distrustful of the NCP-controlled government. As USG efforts to bring peace to Darfur are revitalized under the new Special Envoy, the strategic blessing of the very same rebels who launched the Darfur uprising will prove essential to any security agreement. Unlike Khalil Ibrahim's ethnically-Zaghawa, Chad-based Justice and Equality Movement and the marginalized SLA/Minni Minnawi and the bandits of SLA/Unity, SLA/AW holds significant territory and popular support in the heart of Darfur. Convincing the unpredictable and recalcitrant Abdul Wahid to participate in the Doha peace talks will be very difficult, and if nothing else this

visit to Jebel Marra showed that replacing Abdul Wahid with others or convincing his commanders to attend talks in Doha independent from Abdul Wahid will not be easy. However, there is already something of a virtual non-aggression pact in place between the GOS and SLA/AW since the latter are only defending the people and territory. For this reason, it may be possible to formalize the latter arrangement while negotiating similar non-aggression accords between the Zaghawa movements (JEM and SLA/U) and the government (however since JEM holds almost no territory in Darfur, they have the most to lose from a ceasefire). In addition to supporting a longer-term political framework, such short-term arrangements would be conducive to addressing the root causes of the conflict. The visit to Jebel Marra, which was years in the making (CDA Fernandez has been trying to get there for two years), graphically underscored the importance of outreach to Darfur's eponymous Fur people as an essential part of any solution to the conflict in Darfur. End comment.

FERNANDEZ